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RR RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHLN  
RUEHLZ RUEHNP RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHSK #0270/01 3661339  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 311339Z DEC 08  
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0041  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHSK/AMEMBASSY MINSK 0042

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000270

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [BO](#)  
SUBJECT: BELARUS WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - DECEMBER 31, 2008  
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¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

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##### Civil Society

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#### ¶2. Vandals Attack Human Rights Group Office

Unidentified vandals damaged windows and painted swastikas on the walls of a human rights center office in Novopolotsk December 25. The advocates have appealed to the police to investigate the incident and open a criminal case. They believe that a local neo-fascist group was behind the vandal attack.

#### ¶3. GOB Registers Hare Krishna Communities

A Minsk-based Hare Krishna community spokesperson confirmed December 22 that six out of seven communities had obtained

registration in Belarus. The Bobruysk community remains officially unregistered but still operating. It took six years, numerous lawsuits and fines for the communities to finally hold services and ceremonies legally.

#### 14. Opposition Activists Dismissed

United Civic Party member and former parliamentary candidate Grigoriy Gryk received official notification December 22 that the Baranovichy textile factory would terminate his employment on January 2, 2009. Gryk was fired for "participating in numerous unsanctioned demonstrations in Minsk" and distributing independent printed materials at the enterprise. In a separate case, "For Freedom movement" activist Dmitriy Kukhlyay informed the media on December 25 that he had been fired from the furniture factory in Mosty. Kukhlyay, a member of the local council, would appeal to court as he claims that the council had to approve his dismissal.

#### 15. Independent Journalist Questioned

Gomel police interrogated and fingerprinted independent journalist Dmitriy Karmazin December 19 in connection with the July 4 Minsk bombing incident. Karmazin, a Minsk resident, was summoned to a local precinct and questioned about his whereabouts on July 4, whether he knew how to make and operate explosive devices, and if he ever owned chemicals. Karmazin's associate was banned from the precinct despite constitutional rights for a legal representative to witness the interrogation.

#### 16. Opposition Youth Beaten

Police opened a criminal case to investigate violent beatings of Maladaya Belarus opposition youth group leader Artur Finkevich on December 20. The activist was allegedly abducted by approximately eight persons and transported 30 kilometers outside Minsk late December 19. He immediately sought medical

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assistance and registered his injuries with the police. Finkevich, a former political prisoner, also reported his documents, keys and USD 110 stolen.

#### 17. For Freedom Movement Activist Fined

A Klyotsk district court December 29 fined For Freedom Movement activist and independent journalist Sergey Ponomaryov USD 475 for participating in an unsanctioned gathering December 7. Ponomaryov had held a meeting to found a local chapter of the Belarusian Society for Historical and Cultural Heritage Preservation and discuss related issues of public concern. He stated that he would challenge the fine in court.

#### 18. Heritage Preservation Society Evicted from Offices

Minsk authorities evicted the Belarusian Society for Historical and Cultural Heritage Preservation from state-owned offices in downtown Minsk December 22. The Society had to pay over USD 1,200 of monthly rent under new regulations introduced in April 2008. Society chair Anton Astapovich explained that the group did not appeal to the court due to their lack of resources.

#### 19. Court Bans Extremist, Anti-Semitic Printed Materials

A Minsk district court December 19 banned 13 religious books and other printed materials published and distributed by the Minsk-based Christian Initiative Company as "extremist" and "anti-Semitic". The lawsuit stemmed from numerous protest petitions from individuals, religious activists and the clergy of the Belarus Orthodox Church. The Prosecutor General's office recalled company's publishing and retail licenses and seized 50,000 copies of the materials.

#### 10. German Human Trafficker Convicted

A Brest district court sentenced behind closed doors on December

19 a German resident to 12 years in a medium security jail for human trafficking with the purpose of sexual exploitation. He was convicted of facilitating sex tourism and related services for Germans in Belarus and of trafficking approximately 10 Belarusian women under 30 years of age to Poland.

#### 11. Polish Clergy Banned from Belarus

The GOB banned a Polish priest and three Polish nuns serving in the Minsk-Mogilyov Archdiocese from religious work in Belarus starting January 1, 2009. Borisov-based priest Zbignev Grigortsevich, serving in the Virgin Mary's Birth community, said that he had not "violated any religious regulations" during his three-year service in Belarus. The community has collected over 400 signatures in priest's support and filed them to local authorities to protest his religious permit termination.

#### Domestic Economy

#### 12. Lukashenka Imposes Moratorium on Inspections of Businesses

According to the presidential press service, Lukashenka signed Edict number 689 December 19, imposing a six-month moratorium on inspections of businesses by various governmental agencies including the tax authorities. In six month he is expected sign another edict to streamline and reduce the number of such inspections, which so far have often been used to harass business people, extract bribes and even force them out of business. Nevertheless, inspections will continue if and when ordered by the president and the government, investigators and prosecutors in administrative and criminal cases, and experts in sanitary control, industrial and construction safety, etc. The National Bank will continue supervising and inspecting the banking sector.

#### 13. Households to Pay Only 30-32 Percent Of Utility Costs in 2009

According to the media, Belarus' Vice Premier Viktor Buria told the parliament on December 19 that despite the average 15 percent increase in utility bills payments scheduled for households in 2009, they will cover only 30-32 percent of the actual utility costs. Any further increase in utility tariffs will depend on the natural gas prices, which are expected to be announced before the end of December 2008 in the wake of Russia-Belarus talks. The government is nevertheless set to keep up subsidizing Belarusian households through the whole of next year.

#### 14. Nuclear Power Plant to be Built near Lithuanian Border

Belarus' Energy Ministry announced on December 20 that the interagency commission of the Belarusian government reviewed several options for the location of the nuclear power plans (NPP) on December 20 and decided to recommend the site near the

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town of Ostrovets, which is adjacent to the Lithuanian border and is about 50 kilometers from Vilnius. The commission will forward its report and the recommendation to the president for him to take the final (political) decision on the NPP site. The Belarusian authorities "assured" visiting Lithuanian Foreign Minister Vygaudas Usackas December 29 that Belarus will inform Lithuania about the NPP plans "in the most transparent way". The first part of the 2000-Megawatt NPP is scheduled to be constructed in 2016, and the second in 2018.

#### 15. Lukashenka Makes Gesture towards Individual Entrepreneurs

According to the presidential press service, on December 24, Lukashenka signed edict 703, which extended indefinitely the exemption of individual entrepreneurs from customs clearance and payment of import tariffs on goods purchased in Russia for retailing in Belarus and manufactured in the third countries. The edict allows such individual entrepreneurs throughout

Belarus to continue paying a single tax and a fixed-rate VAT, though the former will be increased 50 percent. They are required to pay 10 percent tax on any sums exceeding revenues, which equal the total of 20 single taxes. The edict has added extra red tape and introduced a life-time ban on doing business in a capacity of an individual entrepreneur in cases when any violations in paying a single tax are accounted for.

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Foreign Trade  
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16. Russia to Supply 21.5 Million Tons of Oil And 22.1 Billion Cubic Meters of Natural Gas in 2009

According to press reports, Russian Energy Ministry officials announced December 19 that Russia plans to supply 21.5 million tons of oil and 22.1 billion cubic meters of natural gas to Belarus in 2009. There are no plans to increase or decrease the announced volumes as Gazprom and Belarus continue talks on amending their December 2006 contract.

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Quote of the Week  
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17. Head of the Minsk Alcoholic Detoxication Center Denis Semenets told Interfax news agency December 29 that the Center, which belongs to Minsk city police, provides its services 24 hours a day, including on New Year's. A few of the center's vehicles will also patrol the city during the holiday to assist intoxicated revelers.  
"All who can recall where they live will be delivered home. All who cannot do so, as well as those residing outside Minsk, will be delivered to the Center where they will stay until they get sober completely."  
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